

Birnbaum headlines Detroit Community Forum

By Eddy Ball

In addition to shrinking population, square miles of dilapidated housing, high unemployment, and a poverty rate of 40 percent, Detroit and southeast Michigan have a large number of major air pollution sources. That made the once proud Motor City a perfect venue for the latest community health forum June 18 featuring NIEHS and NTP Director Linda Birnbaum, Ph.D.

The event was co-sponsored by NIEHS and a University of Michigan (UM) team led by Environmental Health Science Core Center Director Rita Loch-Caruso, Ph.D., Community Outreach and Education Core (COEC) Leader Amy Schultz, Ph.D., and COEC Coordinator Myra Tetteh.

Linked Video

[Watch an UM educational video on oxidative stress \(05:38\)](#)

Organizers of the Detroit community forum publicized the event widely in advance, and made exceptional efforts to engage the people of the city's neighborhoods most affected by the adverse health effects of environmental exposures. UM provided transportation from several Detroit locations to the First Congregational Church, where Birnbaum talked with residents. Organizers also provided Spanish, Arabic, and American Sign Language translation, as well as activities for children.

The turnout was impressive, and attendees appreciated the opportunity to learn, and to air their concerns about their health and environment. As one local activist said, "It's good to see scientists, regulators, state officials, activists, and the community together at this forum."

Seeing and listening — the good, the bad, and the ugly

As a prelude to the evening forum, Birnbaum and community leaders took a two-hour tour of the city and its waterfront, to see some of the city's ugly environmental problems, and some of its solutions, firsthand (see [slideshow](#)). (https://picasaweb.google.com/116447716704088037734/DetroitJune2013?authkey=Gv1sRgCPy28_2IpL2BaQ#slideshow/5891546136256934450)

Problems included contaminated sites of former tire plants along the waterfront; the high-volume Ambassador Bridge, which carries more than 7,000 trucks daily between the U.S. and Canada; Zug Island, a significant source of industrial pollution along the river; and a 250-acre oil refinery in southwest Detroit.

On a more positive note, people on the tour bus also had the opportunity to see the city's pride and spirit at work at the 982-acre Belle Isle Park; the Earthworks Community Garden, which promotes sustainability and food security for Detroiters; the vibrant Eastern Market; and the federally qualified Community Health and Social Services (CHASS) Center.



The facility above processes petroleum coke on the Detroit River, depositing piles of waste on the riverbanks. Some of it enters the water as runoff and some is distributed by wind to nearby communities. (Photo courtesy of John Schelp)



The tour stopped at the CHASS Center (<http://www.chasscenter.org/>) where Birnbaum, second from left, community leaders, and representatives of nonprofit organizations heard from CHASS Chief Executive Officer Ricardo Guzman, left. (Photo courtesy of John Schelp)



Pollution from industrial sites, such as this one near Zug Island, is a source of health and environmental justice concern for nearby residents. (Photo courtesy of John Schelp)

NIEHS investment in Detroit and the state of Michigan

That evening, after thanking the organizing team and the people who turned out to be a part of the community forum, Birnbaum told the audience just how much support NIEHS provides. “Last year, NIEHS funded \$2.5 million of research here in Detroit — and more than \$18 million across Michigan.”

Those millions support a range of research on environmentally related diseases, from infertility, Parkinson’s, and autism, to birth defects and a number of cancers. But Birnbaum’s remarks soon turned to a persistent concern in the community — respiratory diseases triggered by environmental exposures to industrial chemicals, inhaled fibers and particles, and combustion-related air pollution.

“Take asthma,” she told the audience. “It’s a complex environmental disease that affects millions of people here and in other states. We fund many studies on asthma and even more on the health effects of air pollution.”

She also touched on one of the central themes of the NIEHS strategic plan. “As I see it, environmental health research is the key to preventing disease,” she said, “because you can’t change your genes, but you can change your environment.”

Toward the conclusion of the meeting, one of the community leaders at the forum expressed the sentiment of many attendees. “We need these studies,” he said. “Once we get your research results, we are legit. When I hear that 17 people in one block have cancer, we know there’s a problem.”



Representatives of city government and the offices of U.S. Congressmen John Conyers Jr. and John Dingell took advantage of an opportunity to talk with Birnbaum, right. (Photo courtesy of John Schelp)



The panel included representatives from Michigan state government, community groups, UM, the Sierra Club, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. (Photo courtesy of John Schelp)



Michelle Martinez, of the Consortium of Hispanic Agencies, expressed her group’s reservations about Detroit’s environmental quality. (Photo courtesy of John Schelp)

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